

Small Price to Pay

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Summary: "Do they hurt?" The air carried her soft question across the room.

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****Author's Notes:**** ****First, please note that the first section takes place between Halo: CE and Halo 2, the second place takes place about 2.5 years after Halo 4. While I didn't specifically write this story to take place in my Fac Fortia et Patere universe, it most certainly makes sense that this could happen there. (Or, it could happen in some random universe where the end of Halo 4 isn't as concrete as some people fear.)****

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><p>2020 hours, September 15, 2552
Cairo Station, ODA-142

>Orbital Defense Platform, Earth

The first time Cortana saw John half-naked, she was not distracted by his muscular physique or his unnaturally pale skin.

Rather, it was the scars running across his body that captured her attention.

She had read his medical file, of course, but the cold, detached words in the reports hadn't conveyed the way his skin puckered where a bullet had hit him in the shoulder when he was fourteen, or scarred where his armor had been breached by a plasma blast during a rescue mission, or how it had become discolored where he had been hit by a shot from a plasma rifle on a Covenant ship trying to rescue a group of Marines that had been pinned down by Elites.

From her holotank, Cortana didn't know if she was grateful or disappointed that she was restricted from the feeling of touch. Part

of her longed to reach out and feel the scars that John had received over the years, to touch the human behind the armor. The other part of her was relieved she couldn't; personal feelings couldn't be expounded. Not when the Covenant had Earth in its sights.

The doctor paid her no attention as he ran the scanner over the Spartan's body. Cortana accessed the information as the readings were coming through the device. Not for the first time, she wished she had been able to travel with him and other Spartans to the Covenant command and control center, the Unyielding Hierophant. Her clone -or, more specifically, clones- had done an adequate job, but no one could protect the Chief like she could.

The doctor made noises in the back of his throat, but didn't communicate any of his findings to John. Instead, when the scan was finished, he promised to return soon and left.

"Remind me to compliment him on his bedside manner when he comes back," Cortana remarked acerbically.

"How bad is it?" John asked, ignoring her glib response.

"Three days ago, you were practically dead. And that was _before _everything that happened on the Unyielding Hierophant," Cortana replied, raising an eyebrow.

He made a low grunt, the only acknowledgment that he knew she was right.

Cortana went back to appraising the body in front of her. She mental marked each scar that ran across him to a corresponding mission in his CSV. She wondered how many of his injuries could have been prevented if she had been assigned to work with him sooner. His safety -her desire to take care of him- was quickly becoming her priority objective. She doubled-down on the promise she made to herself on Reach.

She would keep him safe.

It didn't take long for John to notice her scrutiny. He shifted slightly, away from her observant eyes.

"Do they hurt?" The air carried her soft question across the room.

He raised his eyes to hers. It seemed strange for the AI to see his face openly. There was so much emotion conveyed on it, a stark contrast to the blank visor that people -including herself- were accustomed to seeing.

For a moment, Cortana thought he might answer her. In the end though, he turned away, hiding his scars -and his emotions- from her.

_I'll take that as a yes,_she thought.

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**1321 hours, October 26, 2559

>UNSC **_Infinity_****, registry INF-101

>Deck 23, Main Medical Bay

The second time Cortana saw John without a shirt, she was not distracted by his muscular physique or his unnaturally pale skin.

Again, it was the scars running across his body that captured her attention.

So much had changed in the years since that day when she had openly studied John in the med bay on the Cairo platform. No longer was she confined to a holotank in her avatar form. She stood in the corner of the examination room as the doctor tended to John's injuries.

She shouldn't have even been in the room. With her corporeal body, she was afforded all of the benefits -and restrictions- as her human counterparts. But, when John, bleeding from a shot from a Needler that should have killed him, asked her to accompany him to the _Infinity_'s medical ward, she hadn't refused.

She tried not to think how that Needle should have been embedded into _her _side. It was only because of John's quick response to the Covenant attack that she was alive.

John turned a glassy look to her. He was in pain, she knew.

Another scar was going to be added to his body. And it was her fault.

No matter how she tried, her eyes refused to look at his abdomen where the shot had hit him. She kept her eyes focused on the scar that ran across his chest, a silent reminder of what Guilty Spark had done to him on the incomplete Installation 04.

The doctor made quick work of tending the injury. She gave the Spartan strict instructions not to return to the combat area for 24 hours before leaving the two of them alone.

Cortana took a step forward. "Looks like you'll have another scar to add to the list." She reined in her feelings of guilt. Forced herself to look at where he had gotten injured. To protect her. To save her.

The once-smooth skin was now marred and mutilated. The angry red color of the wound stood out in sharp contrast to the rest of his pale skin. She closed her eyes briefly before looking away from him.

But, as if they had a will of their own, her fingers hovered over the wound. She could feel the heat coming off his body.

Cortana lifted her eyes to meet John's. He was watching her carefully.

"I'm sorry." The words spilled out of her mouth.

His response was swift. "I'm not."

He winced as he shifted his body. The movement caused her fingers to graze against his skin. He hissed in a quick breath at the contact.

She mumbled an apology, but she didn't lift her fingers from him. Neither did he pull back from her, she noted.

Her eyes roamed the landscape of his body. There were more scars than there had been in Cairo, more testimony to the seemingly impossible tasks he had been able to accomplish.

"Do they hurt?" she asked softly, repeating the question she asked so many years ago.

A silence stretched out before them. Would he turn away like he had before? Or was he willing to let her see the man he was behind the armor, scars and all?

"Yes." He paused. "But, they are a small price to pay."

Cortana frowned as she glanced at his scarred body. "Not so small a price," she whispered.

End
file.